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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7847

RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3582

RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 6636

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 001486

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: MEIRA KUMAR: INDIA'S FIRST FEMALE PARLIAMENT

SPEAKER

REF: A. NEW DELHI 1319

[¶](#)B. NEW DELHI 1163

[¶](#)C. NEW DELHI 995

[¶](#)D. NEW DELHI 988

[¶](#)E. NEW DELHI 960

[¶](#)F. 2008 NEW DELHI 1345

[¶](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: The 15th Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) elected Meira Kumar the first female Parliament Speaker on June 3, 2009. The former Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment is largely viewed as a safe, consensus choice. As a woman and a Dalit (former untouchable), Kumar's selection symbolizes the UPA's commitment to gender and lower class empowerment and is the down payment on the promises of gender equality contained in Women's Reservation Bill, which languished in the last Parliament (Ref A). Kumar's rise as Parliament Speaker serves immediate political ends as well, as the Congress party competes with rival parties for Muslim, lower caste and women's votes in the upcoming assembly elections in Haryana, Jharkhand and Maharashtra. END SUMMARY.

Role of Lok Sabha Speaker

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[¶](#)2. (U) The Lok Sabha elects the Speaker for a five-year term immediately following general elections. Meira Kumar's responsibilities as the newly elected Speaker include moderating sessions in the House, setting the agenda, and authorizing motions and resolutions. The Speaker serves as an impartial representative of the lower house in discussions with the rest of the government. Prime Minister Singh initially appointed Kumar the Minister for Water Resources following the 2009 general elections, but she resigned in order to assume her position as Speaker.

[¶](#)3. (U) Due to the expectation of impartiality, traditionally the Speaker resigns from his/her party. Former Speaker Somnath Chatterjee publicly invoked the tradition repeatedly, but Kumar decided to retain her Congress party affiliation, stirring some controversy in the media. She told the Indian press that "there is no convention that the Speaker should resign from the primary membership of his or her party" and vowed to "function with the same impartiality towards the Congress and the other parties in the Lok Sabha."

Kumar's Inheritance: Babu Jagjivan Ram's Legacy

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¶4. (U) Kumar won her fifth Lok Sabha election representing the Sasaram constituency in Bihar in May 2009. Her election from Bihar is notable; hers was one of only two seats won by the Congress Party in the 40-seat-strong state. The legacy of her father, former Deputy Prime Minister and Congress veteran, Babu Jagjivan Ram, helped her win in Bihar.

¶5. (U) Babu Jagjivan Ram, a famous Dalit leader, won a reputation as a freedom fighter, social reformer and champion of human rights. Born on April 5, 1908, Jagjivan Ram remains the longest serving parliamentarian in Indian history (1936-1986). He crusaded for the rights of lower caste groups in Bihar and nationwide. Kumar took over her father's mantle as a spokesperson for depressed classes upon joining politics in 1986. Over the trajectory of her political career, Kumar has been vocal about human rights and ending the caste system, which explains her popularity in Bihar even as Congress support there has waned. Kumar's rise also helps the Congress party attract rural voters.

Countering Ms. Mayawati

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¶6. (U) In the 2009 elections, the Bahujan Samaj projected Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Kumari Mayawati, as the tribune of India's historically deprived groups, but Kumar can hold

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her own with Mayawati: she defeated her and lower caste favorite Ram Vilas Paswan in a mid-eighties parliamentary contest (Ref C). The Congress party hopes to position Kumar, with her reputation for honesty and consensus, as an alternative voice for lower caste empowerment to counter Mayawati, whom they paint as corrupt (Ref D).

Kumar: Hope for Passage of Women's Reservation Bill?

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¶7. (U) In a country where dowry deaths, female feticide and domestic violence are not uncommon, Kumar's elevation to Speaker is meant to symbolize women's empowerment. Congress has declared its commitment to pass the Women's Reservation Bill (Ref B) despite the fact that the Bill faces formidable opposition, evidenced by the fact that it has lingered longer than any other piece of legislation in the Parliament's history. This bill will reserve one third of the total seats in Parliament and state assemblies for women, as well as reserve 50 percent of all seats in local government bodies in both rural and urban governing bodies for women. Kumar highlighted her historic election, telling press "that a woman has been elected as Speaker is an indication that the Women's Bill could be passed in the 15th Lok Sabha." Women's empowerment groups hope that Kumar's constructive politics, enduring popularity and diplomatic experience will enable her to build the much-needed consensus to finally pass the bill.

¶8. (U) Renuka Chowdhury, former Minister of Women and Child Development was less optimistic about the passage of the bill despite Meira Kumar's election as speaker. During a conversation with Poloff, she divulged, "there is so much vested interest against the reservation bill...even at the cabinet level." In her view, the role of the speaker is essentially without party affiliation, lacking the power to push forward any legislation. Kumar's credentials will not change this fact.

Comment : Symbol Over Substance?

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¶9. (SBU) Meira Kumar's election as Lok Sabha Speaker is largely symbolic, but in many ways, Kumar's ascension to Speaker largely serves the political objectives of UPA

leadership, who are hoping to attract urban women and Dalits prior to upcoming assembly elections in Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana. END COMMENT.

Personal Biography

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¶10. (U) Kumar entered politics as a Lok Sabha Minister of Parliament from Bijnore in Uttar Pradesh in 1986, after serving in the Indian Foreign Service from 1973-1985. She served in Spain, Mauritius and the United Kingdom. Kumar served two terms as MP from Delhi's Karol Bagh constituency, but lost her seat in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wave of ¶1999. She left the Congress party in 2000, reportedly because of the lack of support extended to her after her defeat. She returned to the party in 2002. She was re-elected to the Lok Sabha in 2004 with a majority vote from Sasaram in Bihar, and served as Cabinet minister with the portfolio of Social Justice and Empowerment in the Manmohan Singh government. She has held prominent positions, including two tenures as the General-Secretary, India Congress Committee (1990-1992 and 1996-1999).

¶11. (U) Born on March 31, 1945 in Patna, Kumar graduated with a degree in law and holds a Master's degree in English literature, as well as an advanced diploma in Spanish. Kumar became a member of the Supreme Court Bar Association in 1980. She is married to senior Supreme Court lawyer, Manjul Kumar; The couple has one son and two daughters. Kumar speaks English, Hindi and Spanish.

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